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By

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, D.D.

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HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, D.D.

A sermon delivered at the
League of Nations Assembly Service
at the Cathedral at Geneva
September 13, 1925

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A Christian Conscience About War

"All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."—(Matthew 26:52).

ONE ought to read with awe these words spoken nearly two thousand years ago and only now beginning to seem obviously true. Reliance on violence is suicidal, said Jesus. "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."

When the Master said that, it could not possibly have seemed to be true. Then it seemed evident that those who took the sword and knew how to use it could rule the world. Reliance on violence did not seem suicidal but necessary, salutary, and rich in its rewards. In these words of Jesus we have one of those surprising insights where, far ahead of the event, a seer perceives an obscure truth which only long afterward will emerge clear, unmistakable, imperative, so that all men must believe it.

Pythagoras in the sixth century B.C. had such a flare of insight when he guessed that the sun did not go about the earth but that the earth circled about a central fire. It was a surprising leap of intuition. No one believed it. Long centuries had to pass before Copernicus and Galileo came and

people in general were convinced of what Pythagoras with his inner eye had seen. So when the Master said that the sword would destroy those who used it, that seemed incredible. War suicidal! The world did not even note this strange thing that He said, and ever since men have tried to explain it away or laugh it off as idealism too lofty for this earth. But today that insight of the Master comes to its own. Once more the seer is justified of his vision. Reliance on violence is self-defeating; war is suicidal; civilization itself cannot survive it. That fact has been written in fire across the world until not seers alone, but multitudes of plain people of every tongue, tribe, and nation under heaven are beginning to see the truth once so incredible—"If mankind does not end war, war will end mankind."

Today my plea is simple and direct. Of all the people on earth who ought to take in earnest this unforeseeable confirmation of the Master's insight, Christians come first. This question of war and its denial of the method and spirit of Jesus is peculiarly their business. Speaking from this historic Christian pulpit to Christians of many races and nations gathered here, one finds himself inevitably concerned with that matter—addressing, as it were, the conscience of Christendom about war. The destinies of humankind depend upon the arousing of that conscience. Here in Geneva you once more are setting your minds to the high task of working

out the technique of international cooperation. In this sanctuary we set ourselves this morning to consider the dynamic without which all technique will fail—the conscience of Christians about war.

War a Crucial Question for Christianity

Doubtless we represent here many different kinds of Christianity. We belong to different Churches, hold various theories about ecclesiastical polity, subscribe to diverse creeds. But one thing does unite us all. We all start with and include the Master Himself. To all of us He is the Lord and His way is the way of life. At the fountainhead of our Christianity is Jesus Christ. His life with the Father, His faith in the moral possibilities of man, His devotion to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, His Good Samaritan, His Golden Rule, His Sermon on the Mount, His law of finding life by losing it, His insight into the self-defeating nature of violence, and His substitution of the way of love—all this is included in any special kind of Christianity we severally may profess. How, then, can any of us avoid the conviction that this colossal and ominous question of war, upon the answer to which the future of man depends, is in particular a crucial affair for Christianity? It has been said again and again that if another war befalls us and shakes civilization to its foundations, as it surely would, the Christians of the world will be to blame.

Surely that is true. The continuance of war will advertise that the 576,000,000 professed Christians on earth have not had an earnest conscience about their Master's view of life; it will bear evidence that while they have called Him, "Lord, Lord," they have not been willing to do what He said.

Let us dwell, then, on some elements that ought to enter into the operation of the conscience of Christians about war.

For one thing, there is plainly the futility of war to achieve any of the purposes that Christianity is meant to serve. Indeed, there is modern war's futility to achieve any good purposes whatever. Once it was possible really to win a war. Once victors and vanquished stood in such opposite categories at a war's conclusion that there was no possibility of mistaking the prestige, prosperity, increased power and happiness of the one and the dismal annihilation of the other, but one shocking revelation of the last war was the indiscriminate ruin in which war plunged victor, vanquished, and neutrals alike, the ferocious and untamable way in which war, once let loose, tore at the garments of civilization as a whole so that, regardless of who won it, half the world found itself unclad and shivering when the storm was over.

In the history of war we have one more example of a mode of social action possibly possessing at the beginning more of good than evil, which has

outgrown its good, accentuated its evil, and become at last an intolerable thing.

That was true of slavery. Men at first reduced to slavery those whom else they would have slaughtered after battle. Slavery was a substitute for massacre, profitable, doubtless, but also merciful. It was a forward step from brutal murder to enforced labor. But slavery did not retain its philanthropic good. In the end it outgrew all its benefit and became an intolerable curse. In an evolutionary world ethics and modes of social action evolve also.

So there may have been times when war could serve good ends, when armed conflict was a means of social progress. Of this war or that it may be claimed that the sword won benefactions lacking which mankind would be the poorer. At least, there is little use in arguing the contrary. For the conviction now growing strong in this generation's mind is that whatever may have been true about war in times past, modern war is futile to achieve any good or Christian thing.

Futility of Modern War

To fight with the gigantic paraphernalia of modern science; to make war in our intimately interrelated and delicately balanced modern world, where our most indispensable means of existence already have become international; to fight, not

with armies against armies as of old, but with entire populations massed against entire populations so that bombs rain indiscriminate destruction on whole cities and blockades mean indiscriminate starvation to millions of families; to make war now, when an average five hours of fighting, as in the last war, burns up the endowment of a great university; to fight, knowing that, agreements or no agreements to limit the weapons of war, demonic forces like gas and bacteria are certain to be used—that is obviously futile to achieve any good thing for which a Christian man might wish or pray.

The old appeals for war in the name of a good cause fall coldly now on the instructed ear and cease to carry conviction to thoughtful minds. "Would you not go to war to protect the weak?" men ask. The answer seems obvious. A modern war to protect the weak—that is a grim jest. See how modern war protects the weak: 10,000,000 known dead soldiers; 3,000,000 presumed dead soldiers; 13,000,000 dead civilians; 20,000,000 wounded; 3,000,000 prisoners; 9,000,000 war orphans; 5,000,000 war widows; 10,000,000 refugees. What can we mean—modern war protecting the weak? The conviction grows clear in increasing multitudes of minds that modern war is no way to protect the weak.

A World Court would protect the weak. A League of Nations would protect the weak. An in-

ternational mind, backed by a Christian conscience, that would stop the race for armaments, provide cooperative substitutes for violence, forbid the nations to resort to force, and finally outlaw war altogether—that would protect the weak. But this is clear: war will not do it. It is the weak by millions who perish in every modern war.

As for Christianity, the dilemma which it faces in all this seems unmistakable. The war system as a recognized method of international action is one thing; Christianity with all its purposes and hopes is another; and not all the dialectic of the apologists can make the two lie down in peace together. We may have one or we may have the other, but we cannot permanently have both.

Developments of Nationalism

Another stake which Christianity has in this task of overpassing war and providing international substitutes for it lies in the new and ominous developments of nationalism. In our modern world nationalism, with its attendant patriotic emotions and loyalties, has increasingly taken a form which threatens to be the chief rival of Christianity. To be sure, passionate love of country is nothing modern or new. Its roots are deep in man's instincts and man's history. We here today are patriots. We intend to be patriots. We should think less of each other if we were not patriots. Love of father-

land is one of the oldest, deepest, most instinctive and most noble sentiments of man.

But within the last four hundred years nationalism has taken a new and startling form in our Western world. With the England of Elizabeth, the France of Louis XI, the Russia of Peter the Great, the development began which more and more has nationalized both the inner and the outer life of all of us. Our politics have become nationalized until the aggrandizement of one's own country in the competitive struggle with other nationalities has been the supreme aim of statesmanship. Our economic life has become nationalized; the powerful financial interests of each nation have wielded so enormous an influence over its statecraft that government, with its army and navy to back it, has frequently been a docile instrument for the furtherance of the country's economic aims. Our education has become nationalized; our children have been taught from infancy history all out of perspective, with national egoism for its organizing center and with hatred of other nations masquerading as patriotic training of the young. Even our religion has been nationalized; with state churches or without them, the center of loyalty in the religious life of the people has increasingly become the nation. Let Protestantism acknowledge its large responsibility for this in Western Christendom! In our fight for liberty we broke up the inclusive

mother church into national churches; we reorganized the worship of the people around nationalistic ideals; we helped to identify religion and patriotism. And so far has that identification gone that now, when war breaks, the one God of all humanity, whom Christ came to reveal, is split up into little tribal deities, and before these pagan idols even Christians pray for the blood of their enemies.

Never before has human life, its statecraft, its economics, its education, its religion, on so large a scale been organized on a nationalistic basis, and the issue is obvious. The supreme object of devotion for multitudes is the nation. In practical action they know no higher God. They really worship Caesar. That is the limit of their loyalty. What once was said of the king is said now of the nation: it can do no wrong. And such sheer paganism is sometimes openly flaunted, at least in my country, and I presume in yours, as, "Our country! . . . may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong."

From Violence to Cooperation

Nevertheless, at the same time that this nationalistic process has been going on, another movement has been gathering headway. The enlarging fellowship of human life upon this planet, which began with the clan and tribe and has moved out through ever widening circles of communication

and contact, has now become explicitly and overwhelmingly international, and it never can be crowded back again. Moreover, within this unescapable internationalism of modern life, not yet adequately recognized in government, mankind has been learning one great lesson from his social experiments. In area after area he has succeeded in getting what he wanted, not by violence, but by overpassing violence and substituting cooperation. That is what social progress consists in. All social progress can be defined as carrying over one more realm of human life from the regime of force to the regime of cooperation. Wherever we have civilized any social group, the essential thing which has happened is that in that group, not force, but cooperation has become the arbiter.

That is true of the family. A household where men captured their wives, exposed their children in infancy, relied for obedience on the power of life and death over their offspring, would be recognizably uncivilized. A civilized family, with all its faults, enters into marriage by mutual consent, relies on reasonableness, not on force, for its coherence, and from the beginning welcomes children into the democracy of the household. At least we have learned that violence is no way to bring up a good family. That same path of progress we have traveled in education. Once violence ruled our schools. It was said of an old pedagogue, the Rev.

James Boyer, that "it was lucky the cherubim who took him to heaven were nothing but wings and faces or he infallibly would have flogged them by the way." But now our schools at their best would be ashamed to rely on violence since reasonableness and cooperation so plainly offer, not only a more ideal, but a more effective substitute. In religion also, being civilized means traveling that road from violence to cooperation. Once force was used to compel faith. If a man wished to be a Christian he could be a Christian, but if he did not wish to be a Christian he had to be a Christian, and the centuries are sad with the horrors of religious persecution. But social progress has largely left all that behind and what compelled its supersession was not sentimentality but the insight that violence is self-defeating, that force is no way to get religion. So, too, has government been carried over from violence to cooperation. The process is lamentably incomplete, but, so far as it has gone, it has furnished the indispensable background for all the civilization we possess. Still upon our Western clothes we wear the buttons, now decorative only, on which once our fathers' swordbelts hung. How impossible it would have seemed to them that the time would ever come when the common carrying of private weapons would be unnecessary because cooperative and peaceful government had provided a substitute!

In one realm after another the Master's insight has proved true. Violence defeats itself. It is no way to achieve family life or education or religion or stable government. Those who rely on it as their mainstay and effective instrument are sure to miss what they are seeking to achieve. Always progress has consisted in carrying over human life from violence to cooperation.

And now we face the next great step, the most momentous step in human history. Can we achieve a like result with our international relationships? Can we carry them over from brutality and organized slaughter to reasonableness and cooperation? How the best thinking and praying of our time center around that hope of superseding belligerent nationalism with cooperative international substitutes for war!

Here, then, we face one of the most crucial and dramatic conflicts of loyalty that men ever dealt with. On the one side, our life has been organized as never before in history on a nationalistic basis. On the other hand, the one hope of humanity today, if it is to escape devastating ruin, lies in rising above and beyond this nationalism and organizing the world for peace. On the one side is a narrow patriotism saying, "My country against yours," on the other, a wider patriotism saying, "My country with yours for the peace of mankind." Is there any question where real Christianity must stand in

that conflict? Is there any question that if she does not stand there she faces the most tragic and colossal moral failure of her history? One would like to cry so that all Christians should hear: Followers of Christ, so often straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel, tithing mint, anise, and cummin, and neglecting the weightier matters of the law, what do all the minutiæ of creed and institution that distinguish us amount to in the presence of this gigantic problem in which one of the central meanings of Christ for the world is involved? A narrow belligerent nationalism is today the most explicit and thoroughgoing denial of Christianity, its thought of God and its love of man, that there is on earth.

A Larger Field for Patriotism

How evident this central problem is when we try to discuss the real issues of the world today! Some still see those issues in terms of one nation against another. That is the level on which their thinking runs. America versus Japan or France versus Germany—so in a long list of nation against nation they see the world's affairs. How desperately real the problems are on that level no one needs to be told, but, after all, those are not the deepest issues. A clear conviction grows in the best thinking of today that mankind's realest conflict of interest is not between this nation and that, but between the

forward-looking, progressive, open-minded people of all nations, who have caught a vision of humanity organized for peace, and the backward-looking, reactionary, militaristic people of the same nations. The deepest line of conflict does not run vertically between the nations; it runs horizontally through all the nations. The salvation of humanity from self-destruction depends on which side of that conflict wins.

What has happened thus to make a local, national patriotism, however sacred and beautiful in many of its forms, inadequate to meet our present need is clear. In unforgettable words the world has been told by a great patriot: "Patriotism is not enough." Why is it not enough? Well, patriotism once took men of little, local loyalties and expanded their outlook and allegiance. They had been citizens of a shire; patriotism made them citizens of a nation. Patriotism once called men to the widest imaginable outreach of their devotion; it broke down local provincialisms; it stretched human horizons; it demanded unaccustomed breadth of vision and unselfishness of life. To be a patriot for the nation meant a large loyalty as against the meanness and parochialism of a local mind. But the world has moved. Life has expanded and become international. Now it is possible for patriotism to fall from its high estate. Instead of calling men to wider horizons, it can

keep them within narrow ones. Once the issue was patriotism versus a small parochialism; now the question may become patriotism versus a large care for humanity. Once patriotism was the great enemy of provincialism; now it can be made to mean provincialism and to sanctify the narrow mind.

This conflict of loyalties creates your difficult problems here in Geneva. You know how tenacious the adhesions of nationalism are, how difficult to entwine the thoughts and affections of men around new ideals and new methods of world peace. But this inner struggle between two loyalties goes deeper than the realm of statesmanship; it runs far down into the souls of men where the destinies of religion lie. How can a man be a follower of Jesus Christ and still be a belligerent nationalist, when once this better hope of a world organized for peace has dawned upon his view? Whatever else Christianity may believe in, it must believe in God, Father of all men; it must believe in men of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, as God's children; it must believe in the Kingdom of God on earth. The spirit of Christianity is not narrowly nationalistic, but universally inclusive. When the world, therefore, organizes itself on the basis of belligerent nationalism the very genius of the Christian Gospel is at stake. Once more we can have our old war systems with their appalling modern developments, or we can have Christianity, but we

cannot permanently have both. They worship irreconcilable gods.

A World Organized for Peace

I need not, and I must not, press the analysis further. Two generations ago one of our great statesmen, Charles Sumner, said, "Not that I love country less, but Humanity more, do I now and here plead the cause of a higher and truer patriotism. I cannot forget that we are men by a more sacred bond than we are citizens—that we are children of a common Father more than we are Americans." Shall not each one of us here pray for his own country, as I pray earnestly for mine, that that spirit may come into the ascendency? Christianity essentially involves it.

The first Christians saw this. "The early Christian Church," says a recent writer, "was the first peace society." Then came Christianity's growing power—the days when Christians, no longer outcast, were stronger than their adversaries, until at last the imperial household of Constantine himself accepted Christianity. Then Christianity, joined with the state, forgot its earlier attitudes, bowed to the necessities of imperial action, became sponsor for war, blesser of war, cause of war, fighter of war. Since then the Church has come down through history too often trying to carry the cross of

Jesus in one hand and a dripping sword in the other, until now when Christians look out upon the consequence of it all, this abysmal disgrace of Christendom making mockery of the Gospel, the conviction rises that we would better go back to our first traditions, our early purity, and see whether those first disciples of the Lord were not nearer right than we have been.

We cannot reconcile Jesus Christ and war—that is the essence of the matter. That is the challenge which today should stir the conscience of Christendom. War is the most colossal and ruinous social sin that afflicts mankind; it is utterly and irremediably unchristian; in its total method and effect it means everything that Jesus did not mean and it means nothing that He did mean; it is a more blatant denial of every Christian doctrine about God and man than all the theoretical atheists on earth ever could devise. It would be worth while, would it not, to see the Christian Church claim as her own this greatest moral issue of our time, to see her lift once more, as in our fathers' days, a clear standard against the paganism of this present world and, refusing to hold her conscience at the beck and call of belligerent states, put the Kingdom of God above nationalism and call the world to peace? That would not be the denial of patriotism but its apotheosis.

Here today, as an American, under this high and

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hospitable roof, I cannot speak for my government, but both as an American and as a Christian I do speak for millions of my fellow citizens in wishing your great work, in which we believe, for which we pray, our absence from which we painfully regret, the eminent success which it deserves. We work in many ways for the same end—a world organized for peace. Never was an end better worth working for. The alternative is the most appalling catastrophe mankind has ever faced. Like gravitation in the physical realm, the law of the Lord in the moral realm bends for no man and no nation: "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."

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